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ABSTRACT

Much bilingual curriculum material has little relationship to either traditional Indian teaching methods or to current standards of conventional quality education. Native bilingual programs tend to be poor imitations of European models, and little overall coordination exists in the use of bilingual materials. Techniques by which Native language, information, concepts, and values have traditionally been taught, should be studied, then modified for classroom use. Indian legends can teach moral values and practical instruction as well as entertain. However, some Native elders fear that interaction between story teller and listeners and the relationship between and meaning of legends in a cycle will be lost in the process of turning traditional legends into conventional curriculum materials. Native communities are stressing the importance of good Native language programs as more tribes realize that continuation of their language must be insured if their culture and history are to be adequately and acccurately transmitted. Survival skills should also be taught through bilingual programs. Native teachers are rarely exposed to course work or experiences in working effectively with Native children. It is important to glean from Native elders the methods by which they were taught so that those techniques can be used to teach Native children. (CM)

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Native Bilingual Education: Oral Tradition and the Teacher

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I am a storyteller. As such I carry a rich treasure and a great responsibility, for our legends are not only used for entertainment, but to provide structures and patterns for social interactions of our people.

I am also a teacher-trainer in the area of Native and Bilingual Education. For the last two years I have served as a Field Representative for the National Bilingual Training and Resource Center at the University of Washington, providing workshops and technical assistance to Native Bilingual programs in Alaska.

Most of the curriculum material that I've encountered in the near decade I've been working in the field has little relationship to either traditional Indian teaching methods or to the current standards of conventional quality education. Goldilocks and the Three Bears translated into various Native languages is not my idea of what bilingual education is all about.

* * * * * * *

Long time ago, long before the coming of the Great Flood, or before the world turned upsidedown, all the people were animals. The people came to the Longhouse of the Bear for a feast. Now in those days, people liked to dip their food in oil, just as today people might put butter on their bread or gravy on their potatoes. But there was no oil for their food, and the people began to complain.

"You want oil?" laughed the Bear, "I'll give you oil," and he began singing his song, dancing out to the center of his Longhouse where a fire blazed, roasting the salmon. Now bears have a lot of fat underneath their skin, and as he rubbed his hands over the fire, the fat began to melt, and drip out in the form of oil. This was the oil his relatives caught in a large wooden bowl and offered to the people to dip their food in.

Now someone was watching, and that someone was Bluejay. Bluejays love to steal things, even today, and this one desired the song and power of Bear. The Creator had told the people each one of us possesses a song, our most precious gift. A song can be given or shared, but never taken. Bluejay knew this, but he wanted Bear's power so badly that he decided he would steal the song anyway.

And so it was the Bluejay called out to the people and invited them to his Longhouse for a feast. The next full moon the people came, and just as at Bear's, there was no oil, and the people began to complain.

"You want oil?" laughed Bluejay, "I'll give you oil." Then he danced out to the Longhouse fire, singing the song of the Bear. He rubbed his hands over the fire as he had seen Bear do. Now someone was watching, and that someone was the Creator. The Creator was so angry at Bluejay He caused the fire to leap up,

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burning the Bluejay's hands. Bluejay jumped back in pain and embarrassment, and he's been jumping ever since. If you look at a Bluejay's feet, they look charred and grey. A Jay can't walk like a normal bird, it can only hop. That's its punishment for stealing the Bear's song.

* * * * * * * * *

Now this is the difficulty our children face in schools today--they are all foreced to sing the same song. Like the story my relatives from Skokomish tell about Bluejay, singing the wrong song causes pain and trouble. This is not solely a problem for our Indian students. White children, Asians, Chicanos, and Blacks are also dropping out of school. The test scores of all students, not just Native ones, have declined over the years.

In terms of bilingual efforts, Native programs tend to be badly sung imitations of european models. Native teachers are often hired only because of their fluency in their language, not because of their skills as teachers. "Professional" teachers in charge either have little or no background in the Native language, and any bilingual experience they do have is usually in Spanish or French.

I am constantly astonished at how well Native teachers manage to do what they do, with the little and inconsistant training they have been provided. Often the training consists primarily of a non-Indian linguist coming in to teach literacy in the Native language. One teaches as one was taught, and as a result, our Indian teachers usually duplicate the efforts of their linguists once they get back into their classrooms. The teaching methods that may be appropriate in teaching an adult may not be appropriate for young children. For example, I observed a Native teacher having a kindergarten student laboriously copy a word list of Native "short 'a' vowels". Hardly typical kindergarten fare.

There is rarely any overall coordination in the use of what bilingual materials have already been developed. As a result, I remember walking into a district where the bilingual Native teachers had gone through all the written materials in one week by simply reading everything aloud to their students. It had taken two years to develop what they read aloud in one week.

Controversy abounds because districts can't decide if they want a "cultural-inclusion program," an "immersion program," a "bilingual/bicultural program," or an "ESL program." For the most part such terminology is meaningless, since the title rarely tells one what is actually done in a program. Also, employee turnover is often high enough that some teachers and directors are not even aware of curriculum materials that were developed when the program started. As new directors come in, program philosophy and approaches change.

In addition, Native language programs differ from most bilingual efforts in the sense of a strong emphasis on language maintenance or even revival, rather than primary attention on improving English fluency. It is not a question of ignoring English fluency, by any means, but rather a question of priority.

I feel it imperative that we return to the source--that we look back at how traditionally Native language, information, concepts and values were taught to our children. We can then take these techniques and modify them for classroom use. Understand that we can never fully duplicate traditional methods in a school developed for and by an alien culture. A story is traditionally told when it is appropriate, and not because it's 11:30 AM and Circle Time. One did not traditionally learn language during intensive 30 minute sessions five times a week, and then learn Native values, and then learn arts and crafts. One learned all these things at the same time. The language was the medium through which arts, crafts, skill, etc., were taught. Stories were and are told because they describe the ways in which people can relate to one another.

Legends tell why things are as they are--why there is death...what the consequences are of immoral behavior. Importantly legends are not changed, they remain the same while the audience changes, as it matures, and begins to better understand the many levels inherent within the story. Stories speak directly to a child, and there is a child in each one of us.

From the perspective of adult "cause and effect" and western science, the information that traditional stories offer seems in the words of Bruno Bettelheim:

> ...fantastic rather than true. As a matter of fact, these solutions seem so incorrect to many adults--who have become estranged from the ways in which young people experience the world--that they object to exposing children to such "false" information. However, realistic explanations are usually incomprehensible to children, because they lack the abstract understanding required to make sense of them. While giving a scientifically correct answer makes adults think they have clarified things for the child, such explanations leave the young confused, overpowered, and intellectually defeated.
>
> Children can learn to parrot "...explantions which according to their own experience of the world are lies, but which they must believe to be true because some adult has said so. The consequence is that children come to distrust their own experience, and therefore themselves and what their minds can do for them.[1]

It is important to realize our Indian legends do not exist for any one purpose. A story that entertains can also teach moral values and practical instruction--all at the same time. The Indian languages I am familiar with make a distinction between a story told for its historical significance and stories that in English might be called "fiction."

Unfortunately most non-Indians have only encountered our legends in a translated written form, out of the context of the traditional storyteller. In many tribes, there is a feedback mechanism established between the storyteller and audience. Listeners must periodically respond with a word or sound whenever the storyteller pauses, or else the story stops. This interaction contributes to the ceremonial aspects of storytelling. When one simply reduces a story to ink on a page one loses the personal interaction that exists in the original form.

This is why some elders have misgivings about turning traditional legends into conventional curriculum materials. In the past, with elders providing most of the education for our children there was a monitoring system where each child progressed at his or her own rate. Education was considered

a privilege to be earned, rather than a right for all. Producing videotapes and workbooks moves us further away from the point of making certain a child is being taught at the proper time of his or her own development.

Most legends that non-Indians have encountered in anthologies are only random selections from complete cycles of stories told over specific periods of time, usually during the winter. In fact, this is another difficulty since some tribes have specific taboos against telling legends outside of their proper season. A book or filmstrip depicting a story that can be used at the convenience of a child at any time can then be seen as a violation of this taboo. Because the legends are taken out of context of a full cycle, they sometimes seem incoherent to the casual reader.

If I mention "glass slippers", I don't have to tell most readers the whole story of Cinderella, since the story is part of the Western heritage. Just so, many Indian legends contain similar references, and if one doesn't know the related legends, one can miss the intent and meaning of the specific legend.

In addition, the elements of a particular legend may have specific meaning for a young child who may require the security of a strong parent figure. An older child may need a different story whose message stresses a growing independence and a striking out to accomplish one's own destiny. When the cycle of the many different stories was complete, each child was periodically exposed to various legends, some of which would be more meaningful to a child than others.

This is another difficulty with the way in which stories are used in schools today. Children are exposed to only a small handful of legends. Curriculum materials concentrate instead on worksheets teaching literacy--vocabulary lists of animals, clothing, and body parts.

The structure of the language training is not done in a Native context, either. Instead I find "the blue pen is on the table" syndrome. Excercises concentrate

on European models, resulting in an artificial misuse of the Native language. We end up twisting sentences into conjugated form for the sole purpose of teaching the conjugation of a verb. Many Indian languages don't have the "small talk" or "cocktail party" format of English. One doesn't state "the blue pen is on the table," because the response would be "so?" It is unnecessary to state the obvious if the pen were actually on the table, which it isn't. Thus our children go home from school and attempt to use the language lessons from the bilingual classes and either get laughed at by the elders for speaking in such an artificial manner, or ignored, because elders don't want to reinforce undesirable behavior.

If I sound negative it is because I have been in Native homes where children are literally unable to communicate with their own fathers because the youngest in the family speaks only English and the fathers and elders only speak their Native language. We have trained our Native communities to believe that schools are the answer, and that we can teach our children to be fluent in both English and the Native language.

I have seen programs train children to count in an Indian language, memorize vocabulary lists, and do simple translations, but most programs are not geared to produce fluency. Even though the mandate of Title VII programs is to produce proficiency in English, even this charge is not being met very well.

If all those of Spanish or Asian heritage never uttered another word in those languages, Spanish and Asian languages would continue unabated, spoken in their home lands. These <u>are</u> our homelands as Native people. If this generation fails to learn its Native language, for many tribes their language will be gone forever. A different way of understanding the world will have disappeared for eternity.

More and more tribes are realizing something must be done immediately to insure the continuation of their language, for without that language the culture

and history will not be accurately or adequately carried on. As a result, Native communities are stressing the importance of a good Native language program, but I don't know where to recommend them to look for a good existing program. Those students who are fluent in their Native language are for the most part, those who entered the program fluent,who have learned literacy from school, but not the language.

Communities, especially those in the far north, are urging the teaching of survival skills, since many students are growing up without them. Youngsters who would ordinarily learn certain skills at specific times in their lives are spending those times in Boarding schools. They return home during the summer, and winter skills are not taught during the summer. Students graduate (or drop out) and return to their villages where they are made fun of because they are ignorant of what someone much younger should know.

We then end up with young people who lack experiences necessary to survive in either their Native environment or in White society. While I strongly support the concept of survial skills being taught through bilingual programs, as well as arts and crafts, rarely is there any integration of learning these things, and learning the language. The approach becomes disconnected.

Unfortunately as "professional educators," we have been too glib at explaining how learning works at a tribal community level. To say that elders are the primary teachers is not enough. Youngsters are also taught by their peers, parents, aunt and uncles, animals, and non-Indian teachers. But rarely if ever does one find the specific methods of instruction described. As Jerome Bruner states:

> One does not find many careful studies of education in primitive society with education viewed literally as leading the child into the views, beliefs, and skills of a society. For more than a quarter century, most American writing has been dominated by the "culture-and-personality" point of view that concerned itself with the handling of emotional crisis points

> in a child's life (bowel training, weaning, the arrival of new siblings, etc.). It is difficult in such studies to find much on the development of skills or the process for passing on attitudes and values.[2]

While our elders are still alive it is critical that we discuss with them how they were taught by their old people. Our traditional teaching methods were sufficient to permit survival and sophistication for untold generations. It would be a tragedy for these techniques to be forever lost when they might be effective not only for our Native children, but other children as well. We need to pay careful attention not only to the words that are spoken in traditional teaching situations, but the context of the words as well as non-verbal communication.

As a teacher and as a storyteller, I am very afraid because I see Native people now graduating with pieces of paper who go into their classrooms and teach exactly like white teachers in Ohio or Quebec. As linguists, we speak of compound vs. coordinate bilingualism, where one learns a second language in a specific setting, such as a classroom, instead of learning the second language in the same way as one learned the first. It is difficult to use the classroom learned language in a non-classroom setting. In the same way, our young Native teachers have been programmed to teach in only one way. Even though they themselves may have learned certain skills in a traditional manner, we as "educators" have put blinders on them, so they don't see how to transfer knowledge to their students as they learned such knowledge as children.

We have taught them instead, that teaching is lecturing, based on a centuries old European model from the days before the printing press, when the teacher read aloud from his book, and all the students wrote down the teacher's every word, so they ended up with their own copies of the book. I see Native teachers doing impersonations of the classic elementary teacher, standing stiffly in the front of the class, a handkerchief stuffed up one sleeve, lecturing in a monotone, and

never touching the children. As soon as school is out, these Native teachers then revert to acting normally as Indian people, but they have not learned to merge these two roles--that of teacher and Native, into one.

The description of the teacher is certainly not ideal as I've described it above, from the cultural standpoint of Native or White, but it must be realized that we have few role models of Natives who are also "professional" teachers. Most people in White *or* Native communities fail to recognize the tremendous courage and accomplishments of our Indian people who have managed to go through "the system" and emerge "qualified."

These Native teachers have rarely been exposed to course work or experiences of how to work effectively with Native children. If anyone looks over the curriculum even in specific Native teacher-training projects, one would discover the "specialized" courses usually consist of: A survey course on Native Literature that deals with a few legends, and a number of short stories and poems by contemporary Indian writers; a course in Native language literacy; and perhaps, a course entitled something like "The Indian Child and His Education," which will examine material on low test scores on standardized tests, and may discuss ethnic stereotypes, 90% of this material is written by non-Indians.

Other than these "Native Courses", the rest of the educational experience will be no different from that of any other teacher. An Indian student is expected to take all this in and filter it out as "Indian." I feel the most positive contribution I make as a Native teacher-trainer is to validate the idea that we can utilize Indian teaching methods in the classroom without betraying our roles as "professional teachers." Most of my efforts go into merging the concepts of being Indian and being a classroom teacher.

I could go on at much greater length discussing Native cognition theory, curriculum development, and the improvement of teacher-training methods, but there are time and space limitations. It is awkward for me to try to outline

in linear logic what one should know--I feel like I'm writing the "right answers" for the back of a textbook. From the standpoint of traditional Native education I should tell a story, and then allow the readers to draw their own conclusions as to learning to see, learning to integrate, and learning to listen to the words of those who think in very different ways than we may think.

There is a Zen story (Native stories have no monopoly on truth) that tells of a wise man and a scholar. The scholar comes to the house of the wise man and asks to be taught. The wise man offers the scholar a cup of tea. He begins to pour, and to the scholar's surprise, the wise man continues pouring as the tea spills out onto the floor.

"But you are over filling the cup!" exclaims the scholar.

"But you are just like this cup," replies the wise man. "You come to me asking for wisdom, but already so filled you will not hear what I have to say."

In our efforts in improving bilingual programs for Native communities, we must be careful not to approach as full cups--confident that we know what is best. Our Native people are not fools or ignorant simpletons. We have a proud and rich heritage we wish to continue for the sake of our children and the world. To do so means respectful cooperation of efforts between the professional educational community and our tribal populations. It means our reservations will listen to suggestions, but will not be dictated to concerning bilingual programs, because the whole bilingual issue is strongly tied to tribal identity and sovereignty. The future is dangerous, critical...and exciting.

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1. Bettelheim, Bruno, The Uses of Enchantment, Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y. 1976. pp. 47-48.

2. Bruner, Jerome S., Human Development and Cognitive Processes, ed. John Eliot, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., N.Y., 1971. p. 352.